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Alex Pondering the Light, July 22, 2010, Photo by Kevin Burke, S.J.

A Litany for Alex: Remembering his Contributions to Pastoral Theology

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The reminders of Alejandro's life and celebration of his sacred passing abound. Prominent on my bulletin board are the bilingual lyrics to "Amigo," a song by Roberto Carlos which the choir at St. Leander's Parish in San Leandro, California, dedicated to him at the wake. The phrase which catches my eye is "*Aunque eres un hombre aún tienes el alma de niño*" (Even though you are a man, you have the soul of a child).¹ That was our dear Alex—always open to what an adventure in the garden of God would bring. Among these lyrics, a very Cuban-looking Alex wearing a Panamanian hat appears in a snapshot, one in which he is holding what seems to be a glass of red wine. I pointed out the prominence of that libation in the photo. His response to me: "A sign of great things to come." When I thank God for the gift of my brother, I recall with great gratitude that he was a people's theologian, one whose Thursday night Bible study group wanted to serenade with "Amigo," along with vibrant Aztec dancers who embodied not only our grief but also our hope in the resurrection.

I have been asked to write about Alejandro García-Rivera's contributions to pastoral theology, especially as it relates to popular religiosity and liturgy. When I came back to the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley in 1997, this time as an instructor, Alex had already been on the faculty for four years. We worked together for 13 years and in many ways, this creative theologian became my mentor, older brother, and *amigo del alma*, or soulmate. He showed much interest in my ongoing projects and on more than one occasion, because of his ability to see the larger picture, was very instrumental in my being able to obtain grants for my research. His help with the writing and publishing of James Empereur and my *La Vida Sacra: Contemporary Hispanic Sacramental Theology* (2006)² was invaluable. Lamenting what he saw as a tragic division and mistrust between systematic and pastoral theologians, a split much to the detriment of each, he reminded us that such a work on sacramental theology would be a bridge between the two theological areas. He and other theologians, among them Roberto Goizueta, urged us to write, not another "how to" book—that is, a book aimed at guiding pastoral

ministers in the preparation and celebration of Hispanic popular rituals and how they relate to more official liturgical ones, as valuable as these books have been—but rather a work which would explore what was behind these faith practices. Such explorations awakened our awareness of cosmic sacramentality, the sense that Creation, and indeed the entire cosmos, is infused with God's grace, and how this sense of the Sacred still permeates these Hispanic rituals. It is for that reason precisely that I went back to the index of *La Vida Sacra* where I found that we drew on Alex's work for seventeen different topics. While we were writing the book, I can still recall sitting in the back patio of one of the Jesuit residences in Berkeley with Alex, taping his answers to our questions, some of them having to do with what he had written in his articles and books.

Knowing Alex's love and respect for poor people's piety, I want to make my contribution of this reflection in a way that they would understand: a litany! My earliest memories of litanies are those we prayed as children after the rosary on hot summer evenings in El Paso with my mother. I was unaware at the time of how creatively they engage the call and response format we sometimes hear in Black churches. Some of the Old Testament psalms and canticles, such as that found in the Book of Daniel, chapter 3, repeat, again and again, such evocative phrases as "bless the Lord!" Like Mary's own canticle found in the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke, "God who is mighty has done great things for me. Holy be God's name" [Lk 1:68-79], these phrases have more to do with what God has done in people's lives, rather than about the person herself or himself. I propose this litany for Alex in the same spirit, using a call and response pattern to convey the gift that our beloved brother was and continues to be for us. After each attribute, I briefly mention why I chose it and then conclude the whole litany with a prayer.

ALEX, THE CONTEMPLATIVE, PRAY FOR US!

Alex writes that when God created the world, God pronounced it good. "The beauty of God's creation is found not only in its beholding but in the very act of forming. Thus, I believe, a proper theological aesthetic

must take into account these twin acts of beauty—‘making’ and ‘beholding.’”³ Aside from contemplating nature, Alex was also fond of beholding the people of God at prayer. On more than one occasion during our times at St. Leander’s, he would comment about how moved he was by the people’s devotion.

ALEX, THE INTUITIVE, PRAY FOR US!

Our brother was a firm believer in what he called the theology of intuition. Sometimes in our theology, we come across gaps, that is, things that do not always make perfect sense, such as our rationale for the sacrament of Confirmation which historically got separated from the other two sacraments of initiation, Baptism and Eucharist. His response: “Trust in the intuition of God’s people!” In an article he wrote for *Nuestra Parroquia* in April of 1997, he draws from the life of St. Christopher, the mythical bearer of the Christ child, to understand the meaning of Confirmation.⁴

ALEX, THE GUADALUPANO, PRAY FOR US!

The Cuban-American theologian had a great devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe. Every year you were sure of seeing him at the *Mañanitas*, the morning serenade at the church which starts at 5 a.m. In fact, he is the one who first got me to attend these at St. Leander’s. Surrounded by the moon, the stars, and the sun, she for him is the cosmic mother. He uses the phrase from Mary’s Magnificat canticle quoted earlier in this article, “lifting up the lowly.” But García-Rivera emphasizes that this “‘lifting of the lowly’ ought not to be confused with a purely ethical norm. It is, above all, an aesthetic norm, albeit an aesthetic norm forged in the foundry of the garden of good and evil.”⁵ He describes her as a “subversive mestiza” one who harmoniously brings together the Iberian and the Indigenous.⁶ On his last day on earth, December 12, 2010, his wife, Catherine, serenaded him with music in Her honor. The next morning, he went home to God.

ALEX, THE PEOPLE’S LITURGIST, PRAY FOR US!

When it became clear that he would not recover from his bout with cancer, he invited me into his office and asked me if I would help him plan his funeral. I can still feel the hot tears on my face that morning. He was concerned about his family and wanted to make sure that the people at St. Leander’s would have the freedom to express themselves in church. When all was said and done,

we ended up with a hearty participation which included Aztec dancers, Ron Nakasone, his Buddhist monk friend, Catherine’s Lutheran choir, and Calmaldolese monks. He insisted that I, the presider, gather them all around the Lord’s table, as we often did with the children, because, despite our differences, we are all children of God.

ALEX, THE SIGNIFIER, THE SEER OF DIVINE MYSTERIES, PRAY FOR US!

In his writings, teaching, and celebrating, he never forgot the importance of cosmic sacramentality. He was keenly aware that we can see through to the mystery of faith only if we hold together both the spiritual and material aspects of the world. He was thus convinced that this “fullness of seeing” is also to see aesthetically. To gaze with such eyes is to see the sacramentality of the world. As we recount in *La Vida Sacra*, “To see aesthetically is to see imaginatively. García-Rivera recounts his own experience of moving from the religion of his birth, Roman Catholicism, to Lutheranism, and then back to Roman Catholicism because of the imaginative call that this sacrament [Baptism] had on him. While on a retreat he heard a call which opened up his imagination to be able to ‘see fully’ his own baptism. ‘I began to hear the soft rushing sounds of the waters of my baptism, dissolving the bindings on my spirit, becoming a siren song beckoning my return.’”⁷

ALEX, THE EMBRACER OF CULTURES, PRAY FOR US!

He never forgot the underdog, the little people, those who embraced him as one of their own. As he told me once, “I’m becoming Mexican!” At the same time, as I mentioned above in that photo of him wearing that Panamanian hat: “At the end of my earthly life, I’ve come back to being Cuban!” Alex reminded us that culture opens us up to the gift of imagination. In an article entitled “A Matter of Presence,” published in 1997, he writes: “And if culture is the process by which we come to know what it means to be human, then at the heart of cultures lies a public (not a private) imagination by which one comes to know his or her humanity.”⁸

ALEX, THE SEEKER OF JUSTICE, PRAY FOR US!

One of the claims we make in *La Vida Sacra* is that part of ministering to Hispanic youth is to help them grasp that their cultures are born in beauty, but a beauty not separate from justice. To make this link between beauty and justice,

we engaged Alex's thoughts as developed in his work, *A Wounded Innocence* (2003). "Speaking of the emergence of aesthetic forms in the birth of popular religion in the coming together of the Indigenous and European world views, García-Rivera writes: 'Divine images, paintings, scriptures, plays, processions and music make up the bulk of Latin American and Hispanic popular religion.' It was precisely such an aesthetic dimension which proved the full humanity of the Amerindian, set out a mestizo *imago Dei*,⁹ and fostered a passion for justice. [García-Rivera continues] 'The question of being made in the image of God became less and less an academic exercise and more and more a political and legal struggle.' Referring to Goizueta's work on the Hispanic identity arising from community, García-Rivera concludes, 'Interpreting the imitation of Christ in a communal sense reveals that justice and beauty nourish and sustain each other.'"¹⁰

ALEX, A CHILD OF COMMUNITIES OF THE BEAUTIFUL, PRAY FOR US!

Whether as a child of the universe, the trees and the stars, or of his family—he told me a few weeks before his passing that his deceased grandfather had been by to see him—Alex enjoyed having us over at his and Catherine's home with its magical swing in the backyard. Because he knew that he was part of something much bigger, Alex knew he belonged and so did we.

His reflections on the meaning of "El Día de los Muertos," the Latino celebration of the Day of the Dead, formed part of our *La Vida Sacra* chapter devoted to

the passage to new life in the Hispanic community. We write: "García-Rivera looks at the day through the lens of a family fiesta. No matter how sad or meager may be the burial, no matter how tragic or depressing the death itself, the funeral can be like the Day of the Dead itself: a celebration of music, color, and people happy to be in each other's presence. Moreover, there are more people at the funeral than we see with our eyes. For the whole cloud of witnesses is there, the saints, the living, and the dead. Or as Alejandro García-Rivera puts it, 'the Day of the Dead is above all a family reunion, the people of God—both living and dead—encouraging each other to persevere until the hope of their remembrance is fulfilled.'"¹¹

Let us pray ... O God of all life and beauty, you who are light itself, we commend the soul of our brother, Alex, into your loving hands. Although we mourn his passing, we are confident that for those of us who have placed our trust in you, life is not ended but merely changed. We thank you for the precious gift he was, and continues to be for us. We trust that he, who now rests in your bosom as he contemplates you, Beauty itself, will continue to pray for us, as does our Blessed Mother and all the saints in heaven. As he taught us to look to the stars with our feet firmly planted on the earth, may our own little stories be lovingly woven into the great tapestry which is your great story of our Creation and redemption. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

ENDNOTES

- 1 This and the other translations which appear in the article are mine.
- 2 Eduardo C. Fernández, *La Vida Sacra: Contemporary Hispanic Sacramental Theology* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006).
- 3 Alejandro García-Rivera, "A Matter of Presence," in *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology* 5, no. 2 (November 1997), 52.
- 4 See *La Vida Sacra*, pp. 92-93.
- 5 Ibid, p. 43.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid., p. 77.
- 8 In *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology* 5, no. 2 (November 1997), 5.
- 9 While the term "mestizo" was first used by Virgilio Elizondo in reference to Jesus' marginal location as a Galilean, making a parallel with Latin American mestizos who often have been looked down upon because they do not fully belong to either the



Alex with some soccer playing boys in San Lucas Toliman, Guatemala
Photo by Eduardo C. Fernández

European or Indigenous group, more recent writings have sounded a note of caution, pointing out the danger of further marginalizing the Indigenous communities whose cultures over the centuries have often been ignored if not attacked. For Elizondo's now classic work, see *Galilean Journey: the Mexican- American Promise* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983), and for a critique of the mestizo paradigm, see Manuel A. Vázquez, "Rethinking Mestizaje" in *Rethinking Latino(a) Religion and Identity*

(Cleveland: the Pilgrim Press, 2006), edited by Miguel de la Torre and Gastón Espinosa, 129-157.

¹⁰ Alejandro García-Rivera, *A Wounded Innocence: Sketches for a Theology of Art* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2003), 85.

¹¹ *La Vida Sacra*, 279. The quote from García-Rivera is taken from "Día de los Muertos: Fiesta Familiar/ Day of the Dead: a Family Reunion," in *Momento Católico* (Chicago: Claretian Publications, 1992), 6.



Father Arthur Poulin, *Dancing Sun*, acrylic on canvas, 36" x 24", 2011